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RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 4687
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1937
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 1989
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 3172
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO 1862
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4138
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 4576
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 9150
RUEHRI/AMCONSUL RIO DE JANEIRO 0873
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LA PAZ 002992

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BL](#)

SUBJECT: MORALES' SHRINKING CIRCLE OF SUPPORT?

REF: A. LA PAZ 2637

[1](#)B. LA PAZ 2798

[1](#)C. LA PAZ 2860

[1](#)D. LA PAZ 2618

[1](#)E. LA PAZ 2743

[1](#)F. LA PAZ 2943

Classified By: Ecopol Counselor Andrew Erickson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Evo Morales rode a wave of popularity to the Bolivian presidency, winning the December 2005 elections by the largest margin in Bolivia's democratic history. Throughout that campaign, and to a lesser extent during the July Constituent Assembly elections, his support base consisted of coca growers, social sectors, the indigenous, and the middle class. After eight months in office, Morales has alienated many of his supporters by failing to respond to their specific demands. His attempts to win them back have further estranged him from moderates who saw him as a welcome change from Bolivian politics-as-usual. Finally, his deepening ties with Venezuela seem to further undermine his popularity due to the perception of Venezuelan interference in Bolivia's internal affairs. Morales seems to recognize his support base is narrowing, and is attempting to revitalize his popularity, as evidenced by his recognition of the importance of meeting the deadline for signing new hydrocarbons contracts. However, it remains unclear whether he can satisfy his supporters' competing demands in the long term. End summary.

SLOWLY LOSING SUPPORT AMONG TRADITIONAL ALLIES

[1](#)2. (C) Evo Morales rode a wave of popularity to the Bolivian presidency, winning the December 2005 elections by the largest margin in Bolivia's democratic history. Initially the driving force for Morales' 2005 presidential electoral victory, his traditional base of support that consists of

coca growers, social sector members, indigenous organizations, and labor unions (miners, teachers, transportation and other national and regional labor groups) are increasingly pressing Morales to make good on his campaign promises.

13. (C) This rising public pressure is beginning to take its toll on the GOB, is straining its ability to respond, and is delivering crises that weigh heavily against the GOB's initially high public support and its capability to govern. Eight months into office, Morales has failed to respond effectively to many of his core constituencies' specific demands, leading to a recent storm of public protests, conflicts and criticisms of the GOB, including the following:

-- On September 29, 50 to 60 GOB security force members attempted to enter Carrasco National park in Cochabamba to eradicate coca when armed cocaleros attacked them (reftel A). Two cocaleros died in the ensuing melee. (They may have been the victims of friendly fire.) Despite attempts to spin the conflict to maintain the loyalty of his cocalero base, the confrontation revealed the natural tension that exists between Morales' efforts to meet coca reduction targets and his ties to the country's major coca federation. Morales publicly accused the Carrasco group of being narco-traffickers, to which one replied "who is (Morales) to be accusing us of being narco-traffickers!"

-- October 4-5 clashes between cooperative miners and salaried employees in Huanuni, in the department of Oruro, resulted in 16 deaths, numerous injuries, and substantial property damage caused by demonstrators' extensive use of

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dynamite (reftels B and C). Although the GOB and miners signed an agreement October 23 to end a two-week standoff, the National Federation of Cooperative Miners (Fencomin) formally withdrew its support of the GOB in response to the government's mishandling of the situation. Members of the Central Workers Union (COB) also marched against the government October 10 to demand nationalization of all natural resources, including mineral deposits. Huanuni remains a source of lingering tensions, leaving the GOB without a major ally and having alienated a highly politicized sector: miners. (Both cooperative and salaried miners strongly supported Morales during his presidential run in December 2005).

-- The Assembly of Guarani Peoples (AGP) paralyzed traffic and cut off major routes leading into Argentina and Paraguay October 23 to demand land titles, protest that their rights be formally incorporated into Bolivian law, and press for the establishment of a Guarani development fund to be created with hydrocarbons revenues. AGP leaders have threaten to expand their protests if the GOB fails to respond.

-- Growing lines outside Bolivia's Department of Migration are a concrete demonstration of pressure on the GOB to issue passports to Bolivians seeking to leave the country. GOB mismanagement has turned a fact of life into a political issue, as a passport shortage announced October 25 is stoking discontent among citizens unable to find jobs within the country.

-- Political groups traditionally aligned with the MAS publicly demanded October 23 that President Morales fulfill his campaign promise to increase the presence of indigenous workers in the GOB. With government ministries already creaking from lack of capacity, the prospect of trained civil servants being replaced wholesale by political novices threatens to further exacerbate the governance problems that have already paralyzed the national bureaucratic apparatus.

-- Trade unions blockaded a major traffic tunnel in downtown La Paz October 23. Union members accused President Morales of preferential treatment toward businesses affiliated with

the MAS political party.

-- Ebbing and flowing social sector protests regarding the Constituent Assembly further demonstrate frustration with the GOB. While Morales was successful in declaring the Assembly "plenipotentiary," the Assembly has little to show after almost three months, causing many to begin to lose faith in the process.

-- Labor union members have been calling for the resignation of Minister of Education Felix Patzi and Minister of Water Abel Mamani for several months. Morales has stated that he will not make any immediate changes in his cabinet, but protests continue.

PUSH AND PULL

¶4. (C) Morales' attempts to win back his core supporters have further estranged him from moderates who saw him as a welcome change from Bolivian politics-as-usual. His anti-U.S. rhetoric (again recently toned down since the Ambassador's arrival), his accusations that the opposition has attempted to assassinate him, and his fervent talk about Bolivia's indigenous revolution has many moderate or middle class voters concerned. His frequent statements about legalizing coca and finding alternative markets satisfy his cocalero base, but raise eyebrows among Bolivia's elite. Likewise, while the indigenous applaud Morales' promised land reform,

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the eastern half of Bolivia, where large, agricultural landholdings are concentrated, continue to be worried about losing their property.

¶5. (U) There is more than anecdote to all of this. The most reliable poll numbers we have seen tell a similar story. In May, following Morales' hydrocarbons nationalization decree, his popularity was at a high of 81 percent. Since then, Morales' popularity has been falling for five straight months to a new low of 50 percent (according to an October 8-16 Mori poll of Bolivia's five largest cities). In Santa Cruz, 74 percent of citizens do not approve of the Morales government, but he maintains approval ratings of 62 percent in La Paz and 86 percent in El Alto. (Note: Morales' rating seem sure to rise after the GOB's successful October renegotiation of hydrocarbons contracts with ten international exploration and production companies. End note).

VENEZUELAN INFLUENCE

¶6. (C) Additionally, Hugo Chavez' increasingly stifling embrace of Morales and his leadership are undermining Morales' popularity due to a growing perception of Venezuelan interference in Bolivia's internal affairs. Venezuelan assistance has grown significantly since Morales took office in the form of financial, security/military, and trade support (reftel D). But in the view of some Bolivians, this aid comes with political strings attached. Rumor has it that Morales speaks to Venezuelan President Chavez daily, and the Venezuelan ambassador (like his Cuban counterpart) regularly attends events at Morales' side. Recent rhetoric and Venezuelan-Bolivian military cooperation are receiving increasing negative press, and most opposition and upper class Bolivians believe that Morales has crossed a line. The middle class are wavering, and wondering.

COMMENT: HAS MORALES LOST THAT LOVIN' FEELING?

¶7. (C) Morales seems to recognize that his support base is narrowing. In a mid-October speech in La Paz (reftel E), he

attempted to reach out to the moderate middle class, when along with the Cuban ambassador, he led the crowd in a less-than-rousing cheer of "long live the middle class" (in Aymara). More recently, he recognized the importance of meeting the deadline for signing new hydrocarbons contracts to breathe life back into his administration (reftel F). Renewing his relationship with moderates and the middle class, however, is a long-term project which risks further alienating his more radical supporters who are protesting his failure to address their demands. In the short term, Morales' success in signing new hydrocarbons contracts (reftels) may have won him the renewed affection of all Bolivians. But as we saw in May, his nationalization of hydrocarbons bought him only a few months of social peace. The bigger question will be whether he can satisfy his supporters' competing demands in the long term. In the end, the president's greatest appeal to the middle class -- the prospect of social peace -- may be in the end just as elusive as his appeal to his radical core -- the prospect of social justice. End comment.

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